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"Thwarted innovation" or thwarted research?

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"THWARTED INNOVATION" OR THWARTED RESEARCH?

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Thwart means to oppose or to defeat. It is a fairly common word, if not often used.

Robert Zemsky and William Massy shine a spotlight on the word in their recently released monograph *Thwarted Innovation: What Happened to e-learning and Why*. Interestingly, they seem to be defining thwarted to mean failed. At least that is what casual readers of the report probably think.

Since its release, the Zemsky and Massy (2004) paper has received widespread interest. It was published in June by the Learning Alliance for Higher Education at the University of Pennsylvania. It reported on the results of a "major new study from the University of Pennsylvania in collaboration with the Thomson Corporation."

It is an interesting report, loaded with data and interpretations of data. It also offers some important conclusions, some supported and some not. Actually, a careful review of the report, which is available online, reveals one clear conclusion; the research is what is thwarted.

When any research study is read it is important to locate its purpose, the methods used, and the conclusions offered. Certainly, it helps if the authors use entertaining language to make it a *good read*.

The purpose of this study is difficult to locate, even after careful reading. The closest statement to a purpose can be found on page 18 of the report where the authors state,

> our intention was to focus on the dynamics of innovation and then collect data that we and others could use to chart how the market for e-learning was changing over time—and by extrapolation how it was likely to evolve in the future.

The method to collect information about the study's purpose is easier to locate and definitely should be read carefully. It is certainly interesting. On page 19, the authors state

> [g]iven the absence of standard institutional data reflecting e-learning usage or supplier-provided data on e-learning sales, the weatherstation project initially established 12 observation posts (the metaphorical weatherstations in the project's title): six on college campuses and six within for-profit corporations.

The report goes on to say

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[o]n the six campuses at which we established weatherstations, our intent was to create three panels on each participating campus to be comprised of 15 faculty, 15 administrators and 15 students who would agree to report quarterly on their attitudes toward, expectations of, and uses of e-learning.

The authors go on to further explain the methods used. They state: The process began with an interview … that explained the nature of the project, and asked panel members a set of standardized questions … the measurement strategy embedded in our use of campus weatherstations resembled that of Nielsen Ratings."

The authors also state that "a roughly similar strategy was to be employed at the six corporate weatherstations, though only a single individual was to respond."

Further reading indicates what actually happened. First, the authors say "we abandoned our attempt to track the corporate market for e-learning" and "[w]e also abandoned our attempt to establish student panels." Apparently, corporate executives and college students were not cooperative, and were difficult to collect "weather reports" from.

On page 22 of the report, the authors state somewhat surprisingly that, "[a]lthough we tracked campus experiences for only 15 months, involved only six campuses, and had to abandon our efforts to track student experiences (and the corporate tracking, which they fail to mention), what we can report is that the strategy works.

Finally, the report offers three conclusions that apparently prompted the creation of the report's title: *Thwarted Innovation*. The authors conclude in the report summary that:

1. If we build it they will come—not so; despite massive investments in both hardware and software there has yet to emerge a viable market for e-learning products.
2. The kids will take to e-learning like ducks to water—not quite; students want to be connected, but principally to one another, they want to be entertained, principally by games, music, and movies; they want to present themselves and their work.
3. E-learning will force a change in the way we teach—not by a long shot; only higher education's bureaucratic processes have proved more immutable to fundamental change.

They conclude that "e-learning will become pervasive only when faculty change how they teach—not before." Certainly, this is an important comment, even if it is decades, probably centuries, old. Dewey probably made this statement thousands of times.

Well, what is the problem with this report? Certainly, readers are encouraged to obtain and study it. But, frankly, what is shocking are the pervasive and fundamental flaws in this study. A reader gets a little embarrassed for the authors.

They have a knack for using catchy phrases: "thwarted innovation" and "weatherstation project" are two of the best. They also know how to spin a yarn. They state, "[h]owever, the rapid slide into recession that coincided with the launching of the (weatherstation) project played havoc with this measurement strategy." This is one example of how the authors dispense with a critical problem (no data collected from the private sector) with an unsupported statement (the "slide into recession"). And, they do not seem to have problems drawing conclusions without supporting data; conclusion #2 is a case in point ("The kids will take to e-learning like ducks to water—not quite"). Remember, the student weatherstations were abandoned.

It is possible to go on: the six universities where interviews were conducted are far from a representative sample of higher education. *Thwarted Innovation* has had its day of fame, has been quoted in the popular press, and has caused some concern. Actually, the field of distance education needs reports like this one. It forces those in the field to reexamine their positions, and to realize that innovation does not come easily. Adoption of innovations is a difficult process; one that often produces criti-

cism. Most probably, Robert Zemsky and William Massy are outstanding scholars. Most certainly, *Thwarted Innovation* is thwarted research.

REFERENCE

Zemsky, R., & Massy, W. (2004). *Thwarted innovation: What happened to e-learning and why*. West Chester, PA: The Learning Alliance for Higher Education. http://www.irhe.upenn.edu/WeatherStation.html